

## Vision Quest

*A sermon preached at the Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church August 28, 2016  
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Do you ever get discouraged by the sheer volume of news that involves retaliation against a perceived interpersonal or international offense? Whether it is the report of a profanity-laced screed spoken aloud or posted online which is then answered in kind -- or the death and destruction being visited upon children, women, and men by the bombing, shelling, and automatic weapon fire of countless hard-line warring factions in Syria -- or the exchange of hostile recriminations between Russia and Ukraine and between North Korea and China, Japan, and South Korea -- or the constant charges and counter-charges of corruption and dishonesty in the political campaign -- the wisdom of Mohandas Gandhi's observation, "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind, rings painfully true. Living amid such troubled and troubling times, one can be forgiven for experiencing a very real sense of uncertainty about the power and even the very existence of God, and for wanting to ask God some tough questions.

One of the things I most appreciate about the Hebrew prophets is that they weren't shy about confronting God with pointed questions when they were feeling as if the world had gone off the rails. Take Habakkuk, for example.

The short book toward the latter part of the First Testament which bears his name begins this way:

*"O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you  
"Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at  
trouble? "*

The prophet then goes on to give God a detailed account of the situations about which he is concerned and boldly asks:

*"Are you not from of old, O Lord my God, my Holy One?...Why do you look on the  
treacherous and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?"*

The Hebrew prophets didn't mince words when they lifted their voices to God in prayer. There is no timidity in Habakkuk's cry. He is surrounded on every side by conflict, violence, and treachery, yet even after having openly expressed nagging doubts and probing questions, he chooses to live expectantly like a sentry on a watchtower, sustained by the unquenchable hope that the God who has called him into the midst of the chaos is still the Ruler of the Universe. What is equally as striking as Habakkuk's prayerful honesty and openness, is the response from God, which comprises the majority of the text which Armando read for us this morning. God answers the troubled prophet with a word of great good news, assuring Habakkuk -- and all of us too - that despite all appearances to the contrary, "there is still a vision for the appointed time".

That vision speaks of wholeness and of peace with justice where, in the words of Isaiah, another poetic Hebrew prophet, the lion will lie down with the lamb and a little child will lead them. There is still a vision, God declares, and even if the time of its revelation is delayed, even if it seems as if the vision is a distant – and, some would say, unattainable, dream, that vision will surely be realized. You can count on it.

I need to say that in troubled times like those in which we are living, when I, like Habakkuk, have more questions than answers, I draw great hope from God's blessed assurance that there is still a vision. I believe and give thanks for that blessed assurance with every ounce of strength and faith I can muster. But I also am regularly reminded by the teachings of Jesus that the vision, which is such great good news, is, as one wise commentator has remarked, definitely not easy news. The quest for realization of God's vision of wholeness and peace with justice for the world God so unconditionally and graciously loves comes with a host of challenging consequences. It demands radical change and a willingness to stand in one another's shoes, even and especially when we are convinced that those shoes don't fit. That's what Jesus was talking about, according to the Gospel of Luke, when he preached his Sermon on the Plain. The quest to make the vision of wholeness and peace with justice a reality in this 'eye for an eye' world involves learning to live entirely differently, our every thought and action animated by actions that literally turn the world inside out and upside down. Love your *enemies*, Jesus teaches. Bless those who *curse* you. Do not judge, do not condemn. Love those who don't love you. Give gifts to those who don't say 'thank you.' No more 'us' versus 'them'. Take risks. Be bold. Indeed, the last shall be first, and the poor shall be seated at the head of the table.

So what might the vision of radical change and a willingness to stand in another's shoes look like in contemporary terms? Consider the transformed lives now being lived by two 30-something high-flyers named Sam Polk and David Foster, who both had very successful careers in corporate finance, one a hedge fund trader and the other a private equity manager. Sam and David had 'made it' in material terms, with incomes and year-end bonuses that gave them access to literally everything money can buy. But Sam says that that life of wealth and privilege to which he had devoted his every waking hour left him feeling strangely empty. At the same time, he was aware that there were lots of people who, unlike him, couldn't afford fresh, healthy food to feed themselves or their families. So he decided to completely change the course of his life and set up what he called "Groceryships"—using his money to give poor residents of South Los Angeles a assistance and opportunity to access and learn to cook with fresh, healthy food. David Foster heard about the "Groceryships" effort and was so impressed with the idea that he signed on to help. The idea expanded, and together Sam and David started up a company known as Everytable to address the problem of food deserts and hunger in America. They want 'to bring healthy food to every table in the country, with no one left out.' Everytable is opening small shops that provide grab and go meals, using fresh, local ingredients. The plan is that the shops, which are just getting started, will bringing a new opportunity to reach for health and wholeness to all sorts of neighborhoods including those where poverty is endemic. David and Sam state the

company's mission this way: "Healthy food is a human right. ... We price our meals according to the neighborhoods we serve. "So, to cite an example on their website, the exact same meals that cost \$8 in affluent downtown Los Angeles, cost \$4 in poverty-scarred South LA. What a concept?! Why did David and Sam make this choice? Every life is equally important, their website says. Maybe it also has something to do with the fact that there is still a vision for the appointed time, if only we have the courage to catch it – or let it catch us.

Another contemporary example of vision shows through the work of Ebony Howard, a 20-something attorney employed by the Southern Poverty Law Center. Her specialty is changing the way adolescent males of different skin tones are treated by the education and law enforcement communities. In her research, she has found that activities which are dealt with as 'adolescent misconduct' in young white men are classified much more often as criminal behavior in young men of color. In response Ebony Howard says: "We need to see these young people as our own -- not as 'other'. Think about that - guys with baggy pants, backwards hats, blasting angry, profane rap music, not to mention rebellious pushback and swagger. Am I willing even to consider what it would take for me to get, as the Rev. Eric Jackson put it so well, 'up close and personal' enough to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem? It is a good and God-blessed truth that the beginnings of an answer to that question do not depend solely on who I am – but much more deeply and unconditionally on who God is and on the grace which can change and renew me despite even my best efforts to ignore or avoid it.

Friends, I think we can all agree that we live in troubled and troubling times. Inundated by a continuing flood of bad news steeped in the practice of "an eye for an eye", we can easily experience real uncertainty about the power and even the existence of God, and want to ask God a whole host of really tough questions. I pray that each of us in our own way will be blessed with the courage and faith of the Hebrew prophets, and that we will not be shy about asking those questions when we are feeling as if the world has gone off the rails. I also pray that amid the tumult of our doubts and questions, we can still detect the quiet voice of the Holy One, reassuring all who have ears to hear that there is still a vision, a vision of wholeness that will literally turn the world inside out and upside down, if we have the courage to catch it, or let it catch us.                   AMEN.